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The Historic Ethic and the Modern Church

by

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The Historic Ethic and the Modern Church¹

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Some people need an early start in getting a theological education. My first introduction to Boston University School of Theology was as a babe in arms, when my father, relieving my mother for a few hours from the care of the children, carried me through Warren Hall. He was serving a student charge at North Stoughton. Heeding the call of advanced religious thinking, he left my mother and three young boys behind him in the Middle West for two semesters and came on ahead to get started in the University. When my mother made the long trek from Minnesota to join him the oldest of her three children was less than four years of age.

There are few people who owe a larger debt to this School than I do. Some of my teachers were men who either had instructed my father in studies leading to the Ph.D. degree or schoolmates of his. Early in life I imbibed the spirit which has made Boston University School of Theology the leader in the Church. I was reared in a minister's family where the latest achievements of Boston University in philosophy and Biblical study became the starting point of attitudes and discussion. When I came to matriculate as a Junior in 1927 my subconsciousness was so thoroughly prepared for what I found here that my whole self was free to explore the most forward areas of religious thought without anxiety. I am grateful for that.

My seminary and graduate school years were full of intellectual and religious thrills, as yours will be. My sense of personal debt to the teachers here is therefore enormous, indeed almost overwhelming. And if gratitude is, as Cicero said, the mother of the virtues, then I am well grounded in the moral order at least as far as my attitudes to Boston University are concerned. My greatest hope for all the present generation of students is that they may explore as happily as I did the most forward areas of religious thought and professional skill. As dean I would challenge students and faculty alike to grow a scholarly community of Christian leaders who will set the pace in theory and in practice for the World Church which is now in the making.

¹Matriculation Day Address at the Boston University School of Theology, September 19, 1945.

For about a half hour I now invite you to consider a few aspects of the permanent factors in the historic ethic of the Church and their relevance for the present situation. Boston University School of Theology has in the past been the creative matrix, a means of grace, whereby God has worked to renew the Church and to redeem society. To be this matrix she has had to be rooted in the ancient faith and has had to bear fruit in due season. To be this matrix the School has had to be a genuine Christian community in her own right, for only through the practice of community is true fellowship or mutuality created. The "beloved community" must be established through our participation in it here if we are to establish it in our ministry elsewhere. Love and truth are not ideals to be recommended as abstract principles. They are interpersonal realities and find their way from the realms of mere idealism into the realm of social fact only through the reciprocity of persons in a group. Through the School the historic ethic of the Church has been constantly reborn in the leadership of the Methodist Church not as mere abstractions but as living Spirit. Hence it becomes our common calling to participate in this theological community in such a way that our minds may be constantly renewed and the social order perpetually transformed. But only the utmost discipline and consecration to the cause of impartial truth and love will bring about in this student generation the great end for which we exist. The means of redemptive grace are always human relationships; they become sacramental as the divine life pervades them with its reconciling spirit.

What is this historic ethic of which we speak? Amid the variety of innumerable ancient creeds and varied social expressions it possesses certain outstanding features which reflect the persistent power of the personality of Jesus Christ. Primarily the ethic is a God-centered prophetism in which filial communion with the Father is redemptively related to justice and love in society. As in the lichen the fungus and the alga are advantageous and necessary to each other, as the Yucca moth and Yucca flower are mutually dependent, so in Christianity worship and service are advantageous and necessary to each other. Worship and service are symbiotic. Those of you who have dipped into Arthur Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* will note how worship apart from social service gives us the Yogi while social passion incapable of worship gives us the Commissar. He presents figuratively a social spectroscope at whose ultra-violet end sits the solitary Yogi and at whose infra-red end stands the Commissar. We shall refer to this spectroscope more fully a little later on.

The Yogi symbolizes the exclusively vertical, the Commissar the exclusively horizontal view. In an effective Christianity the vertical and the horizontal dimensions must be a continuum. It is the responsibility of a theological seminary to train ministers who are confronted with the "idea of the holy," who have a profound experience of the "Wholly Other" who is overpoweringly present in nature and history as in our stillest moments. We need constant training for the life of the spirit to be aware of the Holy One. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the School of Theology to train men in the religion of Jesus which assumes that the experience of God provides a power of cohesion in group life which no merely secular attitude or natural grouping can provide. Christian religious experience senses the divine bond holding mankind together. A religious community cannot be reduced to a merely natural group. Religion is not simply the consciousness of the highest social values. Meister Eckhart was not indulging in poetic sentimentality when he urged that the mystic must be willing to leave his trance and serve the beggar at his door. For Eckhart's mystical union with God was with a God who abided in his beggar brother. The awareness of God involved an awareness of the beggar. The power of religious cohesion resides ultimately in that ethical monotheism which has made of one blood all nations of men. And so, our training in the life of the spirit must be sociological as well as contemplative. The Church needs leaders who understand the nature of the social bond, who know the depths of personal privacy, and who know how to relate the one to the other in worship and in social engineering.

II

We are living in a time when men generally have lost the two-fold security which is the product of the sense of the presence of God and of the sense of kinship with one another. They have lost a security which it is ours to seek, to find, and not to yield. They feel the anxieties of aloneness, for they have both betrayed the divine purpose in history and they have lost faith in each other. They do not realize how these belong together. They say, for example, that the atomic bomb is the revelation of the ultimate energy of the universe and are now afraid lest civilization be blown to bits. They must be taught anew that not an atomic explosion but personality is the key to reality. Natural power is the mere instrument of divinely personal purpose. Let us not be deceived at the seriousness of the prevailing anxiety however. Even the secular realists have the "sickness unto death". Indeed, the more "realistic" the more anxious they are. Let us not be optimistic in thinking that this anxiety assures the release of creative

determination to end the war system. It is ours to reconstruct society with purposes which save men from fatal anxiety.

The two-fold insecurity of modern man is not confined to secular leadership. This insecurity has penetrated theology as well. We cannot meet the neurosis precipitated in our culture by the bombing of Hiroshima with a theology of radical crises and anxiety as the root principle in man. Unfortunately much of the theological ethic of the past twenty-five years has expressed an essentially neurotic ambivalence between a doctrine of utter repudiation of God's presence in history, on the one hand, and the dogma of holy war and crusade, on the other. We have seen ministers dive headlong into the stream of revolutionary social action without an adequate religious philosophy and we have seen the alternating frantic grasp for union with the Wholly Other divorced from social reality.

Because he states so graphically the contrasting extremes and because he throws down a challenge to find the synthesis between the Yogi and the Commissar, let us return to Arthur Koestler's sociological spectroscope once more and see what he portrays. Here are his opening paragraphs:

"I like to imagine an instrument which would enable us to break up patterns of social behaviour as the physicist breaks up a beam of rays. Looking through this sociological spectroscope we would see spread out under the diffraction grating the rainbow-coloured spectrum of all possible human attitudes to life. The whole distressing muddle would become neat, clear and comprehensive.

"On one end of the spectrum, obviously on the infra-red end, we would see the Commissar. The Commissar believes in Change from Without. He believes that all the pests of humanity, including constipation and the Oedipus complex, can and will be cured by Revolution, that is, by a radical reorganization of the system of production and distribution of goods; that this end justifies the use of all means, including violence, ruse, treachery and poison; that logical reasoning is an unfailing compass and the Universe a kind of very large clockwork in which a very large number of electrons once set into motion will forever revolve in their predictable orbits; and that whosoever believes in anything else is an escapist. This end of the spectrum has the lowest frequency of vibrations and is, in a way, the coarsest component of the beam; but it conveys the maximum amount of heat.

"On the other end of the spectrum, where the waves become so short and of such high frequency that the eye no longer sees them, colourless, warmthless but all-penetrating, crouches the

Yogi, melting away in the ultra-violet. He has no objection to calling the universe a clockwork, but he thinks that it could be called, with about the same amount of truth, a musical-box or a fishpond. He believes that the End is unpredictable and that the Means alone count. He rejects violence under any circumstances. He believes that logical reasoning gradually loses its compass value as the mind approaches the magnetic pole of Truth or the Absolute, which alone matters. He believes that nothing can be improved by exterior organisation and everything by the individual effort from within; and that whosoever believes in anything else is an escapist. He believes that the debt-servitude imposed upon the peasants of India by the money lenders should be abolished not by financial legislation but by spiritual means. He believes that each individual is alone, but attached to the all-one by an invisible umbilical cord; that his creative forces, his goodness, trueness and usefulness can alone be nourished by the sap which reaches him through this core; and that his only task during his earthly life is to avoid any action, emotion or thought which might lead to a breaking of the cord. This avoidance has to be maintained by a difficult, elaborate technique, the only kind of technique which he accepts.

"Between these two extremes are spread out in a continuous sequence the spectral lines of the more sedate human attitudes. The more we approach its centre, the more does the spectrum become blurred and woolly. On the other hand, this increase of wool on the naked spectral bodies makes them look more decent, and intercourse with them more civilised. You cannot argue with a naked Commissar—he starts at once to beat his chest and next he strangles you, whether you be friend or foe, in his deadly embrace. You cannot argue with the ultra-violet skeleton either, because words mean nothing to him. You can argue with post-war planners, Fabians, Quakers, liberals and philanthropists. But the argument will lead nowhere, for the real issue remains between the Yogi and the Commissar, between the fundamental conceptions of Change from Without and Change from Within.

"It is easy to say that all that is wanted is a synthesis—the synthesis between saint and revolutionary; but so far this has never been achieved."¹

I believe that in the great historic ethic of Christianity is to be found that synthesis for which this author gropes. It was revealed in the personality of Jesus. Personalistic theology seeks to formulate it in terms of modern culture. I believe that that type of theology which is expressing itself in the cooperative work of ecumenical Christianity is formulating some current answers to the challenge. I

¹Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, pp. 1-2.

believe that the wholistic and communitarian movement in contemporary theology has within it the promise of matching secular movements for one world with a global social gospel. It seems to me peculiarly significant that schools which have been dominated by a personalistic emphasis have escaped both the extremism and fadism of the present century and are now in a position to lead out.

Between the Yogi and the Commissar I would place five permanent elements in the Christian ethic which belong synoptically together and constitute an organic whole. These five elements are not arbitrarily selected by myself. Ernst Troeltsch set them forth in the conclusion to his monumental work on the *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* over thirty years ago. These five elements are amazingly relevant to the present scene; and in view of the movements which have swept over Europe and America since he lifted them up for emphasis, they seem especially well grounded.

“*First*: The Christian Ethos alone possesses, in virtue of its personalistic Theism, a conviction of personality and individuality, based on metaphysics, which no Naturalism and no Pessimism can disturb.”

“*Second*: The Christian Ethos alone, through its conception of a Divine Love which embraces all souls and unites them all, possesses a Socialism which cannot be shaken.”

“*Thirdly*: Only the Christian Ethos solves the problem of equality and inequality, since it neither glorifies force and accident in the sense of a Nietzschean cult of breed, nor outrages the patent facts of life by a doctrinaire equalitarianism. . . . The ethical values of voluntary incorporation and subordination on the one hand, and of care and responsibility for others on the other hand, place each human being in circumstances where natural differences can and should be transmuted into the ethical values of mutual recognition, confidence, and care for others.”

“*Fourthly*: Through its emphasis upon the Christian value of personality, and on love, the Christian Ethos creates something which no social order—however just and rational—can dispense with entirely—. . . , it produces charity. Charity, or active helpfulness, is the fruit of the Christian Spirit, which alone keeps it alive.”

“*In conclusion*: The Christian Ethos gives to all social life and aspiration a goal which lies far beyond all the relativities of this earthly life, compared with which, indeed, everything else represents merely approximate values. . . . It raises the soul above the world without denying the world. . . . The life beyond this world is, in very deed, the inspiration of the life that now is.”

These five factors are, then, the key ideas in a synoptic ethic: individuality, sociality or socialism, the resolution of equality-inequality in mutual service, love beyond justice, ultimate meaning beyond historical relativity.

III

Time permits but a brief comment on each of these leading ideas. The first is the value of individual personality grounded in personal theism. Confident in the metaphysical integrity of this position, Troeltsch contrasted it to all *pessimism* and all *naturalism* which tended to repudiate this high valuation. Both pessimism and naturalism have been aggressive philosophies in recent decades. Pessimism has taken both theological and secular directions and the same must be said for naturalism. They may be conveniently considered together, however. There is evidence today that humanistic naturalism has spent its force; that Nazi collectivism has never commended itself to the Christian conscience; and that Barthian pessimism has failed to overcome the vitality of philosophical theology. In naturalistic humanism and in Barthian irrationalism a low estimate is placed on man. If man is to rise to the challenge of the hour he must have a sense of cosmic support. The more humanistic the idealism the more easily does the disillusionment set in and the disappointment dominate. Just now pessimistic theologies are the vogue. Their pessimism lacks the majesty of prophetic tragedy. They tempt men to enjoy the inevitable failures which they predict on the human scene. On the other hand, the historic ethic sets a high value on the person and his perfecting. We know that the pioneer of our salvation, as the writer of Hebrews says it, was perfected through suffering. His suffering and death made personal life triumphant; for in Christ we see how the divine life sustains the individual spiritual life in the crucifixion and resurrection. Christian faith transcends tragedy and conserves personal integrity.

In its view of history as in its view of the devotional life personal theism recognizes the ultimate validity of private experience while noting the natural continuities of life with life and life with God. Not only does the Christian ethic therefore resist pessimism and naturalism, it resists also mystical monism. Personal theism emphasizes the rich life of communion with God without surrendering the individual to the ultra-violet end of the spectrum which is symbolized by Koestler's Yogi. Mysticism need not be impersonal monism. I know of no one who states the integrity of individuality in mystical experience as well as the 14th century John Ruysbroeck, one of the Brethren of the Common Life:

"That measureless Love which is God Himself, dwells in the pure deeps of our spirit, like a burning brazier of coal. And it throws forth brilliant and fiery sparks which stir and unkindle heart and senses, will and desire, and all the powers of the soul, with a fire of love. . . . As air is penetrated by the brightness and the heat of the sun, and iron is penetrated by fire; so that it works through fire the works of fire, since it burns and shines like the fire . . . yet each of these keeps its own nature—the fire does not become iron, and the iron does not become fire, for the iron is within the fire and the fire within the iron, so likewise God is in the being of the soul. The creature never becomes God as God never becomes creature. . . . The union takes place in God through grace and our hometurning love. . . ."

The second principle is what Troeltsch called socialism. Like individuality he felt that the social principle was metaphysically grounded. We all have our unity in God, he said. But Troeltsch also recognized that men not only have an ultimate community in God, they have real community in social groups. The group is a reality; it is not a myth. The group is the reality with which our century must come to terms creatively if we are to make both domestic and international living tolerable. One of the great assignments which the Christian Church has to accept in this generation is the improvement and organization of group life. All about us men are seeking for the solution of the problem of group prejudice. Some defeatist theologians have taken the view that "moral" man is always immoral in groups. They despair of history and fail to perceive the redemptive power of fellowship. But many less defeatist non-theologians are constructively engrossed in the issues of group dynamics. We in the Church must canalize our spiritual resources so as to offer some real help in the present crisis of group conflict. In order to do so we must re-examine the nature of the Church as community and we must understand ourselves as we participate in varying social groups. We need to explore more fully the principles of group dynamics, the ethics of group decisions, and the arts of reconciliation. We must accept the challenge of Christian group integration within the four walls of the seminary and in the classroom. We should be sensitive to the levels of interaction in our own educational experience and the forces that make for prejudice and those that make for understanding. What we preach to the world we must first seek to realize within the Church. The secular order has a right to expect that the Christian Church demonstrate a "new order" within itself.

There is still a lingering individualism among Christians which prevents wholehearted exploration in group living. In many sections of

the Church influential leaders still pose the personal and social principles in opposition to each other. The fact is that these are bi-polar. The one without the other is an abstraction. Personality is communitarian.

Back in the 1890's, when Walter Rauschenbusch was still preaching in Hell's Kitchen in New York City he rose to the occasion of this issue in words which are truly classic. In his formula the dilemma of the Yogi and the Commissar is resolved in the idea of the Kingdom of God.

"Most people look only to the renewal of the individual. Most social reformers look only to the renewal of society. We believe that two factors make up the man, the inward and the outward, and so we work for the renewal and Christianization of the individual *and* of society.

"Most Christians demand the private life for God and leave business to the devil. Most social reformers demand justice for business life, in order that private life may be given to pleasure. We plead for self-sacrifice in private life, in order to achieve justice in business life; and for justice in business life that purity in private life may become possible.

"Most Christians say: Wait until all men are converted, then a perfect social order will be possible. Most social reformers say: Wait till we have a perfect social order, then all men will be good. We say: Go at both simultaneously; neither is possible without the other.

"They all say: Wait! We say: Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand."¹

When we bring the principle of personality and the principle of sociality together in a communitarian unity we are face to face with Troeltsch's *third* permanent element in the historic ethic. The problem of equality and inequality is resolved by raising it to the level of mutual service. Christianity penetrates beyond the accidents of birth and social origin and sees in the diversity of gifts an occasion for the development of reciprocity and the spirit of love.

From a practical point of view such an ethical principle requires democratic planning for the general welfare. An acute awareness of past failures has made this the age of planning, of unity, or collectivity. Less and less does the supply and demand mechanism of market and price determine social process. The question before us is what quality of planning and for whom? What we need is economic planning in

¹"For the Right," *Society and the Individual*, 1890 in Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch*, 82-83.

which we relate maximum capacity to produce to maximum social need. More than ever before ministers must know the nature of community organization. They must understand social purposes. They must be conversant with the principles of individual and group participation in planning. They must be clear on the rights which must be respected in democratic planning. They need a broad philosophy of community values and a specific understanding of community organization.

In the midst of the obvious inequalities of human gifts and moral achievements what are those universal rights which are relevant for our day? We have our Bill of Rights, of course. There is the G. I. Bill of Rights. The Natural Resources Planning Board has its bill of social rights. The Cleveland Conference urged an international bill of rights upon the State Department and there were many staunch defenders of such an international bill of rights at San Francisco. If we are adequately to address ourselves as churchmen to these claims we must penetrate beyond individualistic cries for rights to the level of common human needs, everywhere in the world.

The desire of the nations for institutions of social justice which will establish and preserve a measure of order and peace in the world is constantly modified by the love of power which attends the special privilege of the strong. To keep alive the honest demand for real justice is the task of the church as the conscience of the state. But no mere legal justice will suffice to sustain the social order. Some of the most despised men in their generation are those so-called Christians who drive their bargains within the business agreements sanctioned by law. Troeltsch emphasized in his *fourth* point what we all know to be the case; that no social order—however just and rational—can dispense with that spirit of active helpfulness which keeps true charity alive. Christianity has the power to release into history and into human groups this spirit of love. But if love is to be released into the social order in a Christian way, that social order must develop institutions of responsible good will. Love must become the rational basis of political and economic reconstruction. If we persist in holding on to both love and laissez-faire, going radically in opposite directions, we shall continue to produce what Karen Horney correctly calls the “neurotic personality of our time.”

Finally, we must recognize the ultimate destiny of the self. The City of God is both in time and in eternity, in earthly history and in cosmic history. The neo-orthodox theologians are not wrong in pointing to the transcendent destiny of man. Troeltsch recognized this as a permanent element in Christianity. But Christianity at its best raises the soul above the world without denying the world. Christianity is good news, not bad news; it is militant and triumphant, not defeatist.

Its final accent is not that on the highest level of Christian living there is still sin and guilt, but its accent is that on every level man may experience salvation. The clue to man's social experience and to his private experience is not that he is a lost image of the divine, but rather that he has a calling to divine sonship. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know . . ." Man's divine vocation points to his eternal career in which human history is transcended in cosmic history.

Here, then, in brief are the general outlines of a Christian philosophy which can guide us through the confusion of the present. The Church must take the social initiative and explore practical ways to relate its ethic to the growing movements of the time. We need ministers who do more than sit on the side-lines and pass judgment on the procession of crises. We need ministers who do not wait until the time is ripe to pass judgment as to whether a movement is to the right or to the left, radical or safe. We need ministers who can step into the center of the social process in a community and guide the basic decisions of group action. We need ministers who can train thousands of adult laymen in the ways of Christian democratic reconstruction. Therefore, we propose to train you who have matriculated in such a way that you are historically well-grounded, philosophically adequate, socially relevant, and professionally skillful. We invite you to find freedom and security in the heritage of the faith, freedom and security in your spiritual disciplines, freedom and security in your religious passion, freedom and security in your decision to let God's kingdom come!

ANNOUNCING THE SIXTEENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
ON PREACHING

FEBRUARY 11, 12, AND 13, 1946
COPELEY METHODIST CHURCH

This is a great hour in which the Church is standing, calling the world and the Church itself to reconciliation and reconstruction. We have named the Conference this year: "Preaching to Win the Peace". This theme suggests the unfinished task before us, our obligation to make good on the sacrifices of the war, the role of the Christian minister in the shaping of domestic and world events, and the great opportunities confronting the Church. The following are the outstanding personalities who will address the Conference and the subjects of their addresses:

- DANIEL L. MARSH, President, Boston University—*The Peace We Preach*.
L. O. HARTMAN, Bishop, Methodist Church, Boston Area—*Democratic Freedom and Spanish Fascism*.
A. CLAYTON POWELL, Jr., Member, United States Congress—*The Unfinished Business of the Peace*.
G. BROMLEY OXNAM, Bishop, Methodist Church, New York Area—*The Realism of World Order*.
McILLYAR H. LICHLITER, Former Pastor of the First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio—*The Disciplines of Relevance in Preaching*.
FRANK A. COURT, First Methodist Church, Duluth, Minnesota—*Winning the Peace in the Local Church*.
HUNTLEY DUPRÉ, World Student Service Fund—*Youth and Global Conscience*.
EARL CRANSTON, Phillips Professor of Religion, Dartmouth College—*Christianity and the Rights of Minorities*.
JAMES B. CAREY, Secretary-Treasurer, Congress of Industrial Organizations—*The Issues of Industrial Peace*.
NEWELL S. BOOTH, Bishop, Methodist Church, Elisabethville (Belgian Congo) Area, Africa—*A Bill of Rights for African Labor*.
FLOYD SHACKLOCK, Professor of Missions and Religions, Drew Theological Seminary—*Christian Bases of Peace in Japan*
WELDON F. CROSSLAND, Asbury-First Methodist Church, Rochester, New York—*A Planned Program for the Church Year*.
DUTTON S. PETERSON, Odessa Methodist Church, Odessa, New York—*God of the Sod*.
HERBERT GEZORK, Associate Professor of Social Ethics, Andover Newton Theological School—*Christian Bases of Peace in Germany*.
RALPH E. DIFFENDORFER, Board of Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Church—*The World Parish*.

The Annual Alumni Banquet will be held on February 12th. The speaker at the Banquet will be Dr. Charles F. Boss, Jr., Chairman of the Commission on World Peace of the Methodist Church—*Conscription and the Christian Testimony*.